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**Difficulties and possibilities of Christian-inspired
politics in the Eastern part of Germany
before and after 1989
A personal summary**

Otto Preu

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In treating this topic, I shall confine myself to most recent years, limiting my paper to the Christian-inspired politics I experienced in the former German Democratic Republic. But while looking back, I shall also try to identify tasks for the future.

When one turns one's attention to the subject of Christian politics, it is imperative to think about non-Christian - or un-Christian - politics and in doing so attempt to define the relationship between politics and religion. I shall make some short remarks in the following.

Any theorizing about these problems must take its beginning in the Reformation, at the latest. This is not to signify that I shall bore the reader with long historical digressions. But it is important to bear in mind the fact that for many centuries the temporal authority was obliged to serve the Church and to urge the people to live a quiet and peaceful life.

Thomas Aquinas had in his time designated this role to the king on the basis of the relationship between Christianity and Aristotelianism. Kings should have the duty to ensure the virtuous life of their subjects as the purpose of life was the attainment of heavenly bliss.

Martin Luther's 'Two-Empire theory' placed implicit obedience to authority above all else. Luther sided with the princes, because he saw this as the only chance of survival for the Reformation. Luther referred to Romans 13: 'Be subservient to authority, because it is from God'. He believed that normally there is no need to fear authority. Some centuries later, so-called 'German Christians' misused Luther's theory and claimed that Hitler was from God. Honecker, as an atheist, assumed in his talks with bishops that in some way he fulfilled the laws of history and thus also the will of God.¹ This goes back to the 'Two-Empire theory' of Luther. It had evidently never occurred to Luther that one day Germany would be governed by 'crooks'.

After the French revolution, the State was no longer to be responsible for either heavenly bliss or earthly happiness. The State should only ensure the protection of the law. Everyone should live with free will. Religion became a private matter. Things should thus be unproblematic.

However in almost every state in central and eastern Europe, people believed that as members of a nation their happiness was ensured only if they had ascendancy over foreigners, Jews, and other minorities. Thus, figuratively speaking, the nation was raised to heaven, and became a saved community, a community of salvation. Minorities were accused of being responsible for political and economic difficulties.² It was not only nations that appeared as 'saved communities': One could point to the Aryan race in Hitler's Germany and the so-called 'party of the working-class' in the communist states.

Characteristic features of such saved communities are faith in the future and progress as well as political ideologies with a basic emancipatory attitude. We must not be surprised to find that in states which express themselves as more or less saved communities, church policy is particularly sensitive.

In the German Democratic Republic Christians were a minority: so, too, were the marxists. The large majority, approximately 60-70% of the population, were masses believing in nothing, and fairly easy to influence. The leading party lied to these people and cheated them. In return, they took revenge by cheating the state in exactly the same way - or to a greater extent.

The United Socialist Party governed with a fair amount of fear. There was some level of prosperity in the society, so everybody had something to lose. Even the churches were not free of fear. For a very long time they would not allow opposition groups (for example environmental groups) to meet on their premises. They wanted to avoid getting into conflict with the state. The churches had their self-image, their interests, and they protected themselves by exercising self-censorship.

My topic demands that I exercise self-restraint, and to that end I will concentrate on the co-operation between the churches, the state and the Christian Democratic party in the German Democratic Republic. As often as possible, the Christian Democratic Party (East) referred to the foundation proclamation of the 26th of July, 1945, which states:

We pledge to eradicate totally everything that is responsible for this colossal human sacrifice and this inexpressible misery (the aftermath of war), and to take all possible steps to protect mankind from a similar catastrophe in the future.

The Christian Democratic Party positioned itself in an anti-fascist, democratic, and Christian tradition. I have always had the impression that the leadership of the Christian Democratic Party held on to these traditional lines with great seriousness. Briefly, the Christian Democratic Party wanted the following (according to the statements of the leadership):³

- to see that Christian principles are maintained in the German Democratic Republic, and that Christian values are respected in the German Democratic Republic.
- to see that Christian culture and traditions are not lost under socialist conditions.
- to see that Christians contribute to the socialist state and have an influence on policy, especially in specific functions in the communities.

The Christian Democratic party had 70 members and substitutes in the former East German parliament, approximately 20,000 members representing people in districts, towns and municipalities, as well as almost 3,500 mayors and deputies.⁴ The Christian Democratic party referred to the peasant leader and pastor Thomas Muntzer, to Martin Luther, and to pastor Bonhoefer, who was murdered by the Nazis, saying:

Certainly we cannot attain the ideal human society. We are not communists. But we can try to make the best in the sense of the biblical quotation 'Strive for the best for the town'.

The Christian Democratic Party (East) was reformist but not revolutionary. The leadership of the party accepted the leading role of the working class, thus permanently being opposed by the grassroots. The leadership and the grassroots were two factions that drifted further and further apart until in 1989 they were at opposite poles.

Until the middle of the 1950s, the Christian Democratic Party was responsible for the relationship between the church and the state. There was the 'Nuschke Office'. But the central committee of the United Socialist Party had a similar institution under the chairmanship of the communist Willy Barth. This was the 'group for ecclesiastical

affairs'. Later the state secretariat for ecclesiastical affairs was founded and led by United Socialist Party officials with good intentions (but when matters were put to a test, hard-liners). The deputy and theological spokesman, who also served as a fig-leaf to disguise the nakedness of the dictators, was an official of the Christian Democratic Party.⁵

There were secretaries for ecclesiastical affairs not only on the governing board of the CDU in Berlin, but also on county committees. They met with bishops and were invited to church congresses. Problems were discussed and common points of view were searched for and reported to the state authorities. Some clergymen of the Protestant Church, for instance Schorlemmer, saw their church leadership both as a bulwark against communism and the extended arm of state power. The leadership of the church emphasized to the clergy that they should not pursue an 'all-or-nothing' strategy, but should strive for a step-by-step change of the system.

The relationship between the church and the state was very variable. The free churches had the least problems. They were considered to be small and insignificant. They kept a low profile and followed an independent parish life without political ambitions.

The Catholic Church acted in opposition to the state with due restraint. In pastoral letters it took a more or less open and critical stand on events in the German Democratic Republic and the position of the church. The state did not have much chance to take steps against the Catholic Church. Contacts were mostly restricted to solving e.g. organizational problems connected with pilgrimages or Catholic meetings.

The Protestant Church experienced the relationship to the state as a permanent struggle for the integrity of church work, for the winning of freedom for the church and for its members, but also for people who did not belong to the church. There were many crises. I remember many dangerous situations. At the beginning of the 1950s, an agreement about pastoral care in the armed forces was entered in the Federal Republic of Germany. Almost all synods in the German Democratic Republic agreed with it. The state immediately demanded the recognition of the German Democratic Republic as a prerequisite for talks. The Youth Congregation was almost prohibited. Visits to the student community led to threats of being sent down from university.

The church reacted by 'taking note of the existence of two German states as a condition of life imposed by God'. The partition of Germany was respected as a divine punishment, to which Germans had to resign themselves.

Later when the Union of Protestant Churches in the German Democratic Republic was founded, the term 'Church in Socialism' was coined. The central committee of the United Socialist Party wrote the following diabolical sentence in its report to the VIIth party conference of the United Socialist Party in 1967:

The majority of religiously committed citizens and many office-holders of the church are taking part in the general strengthening of the socialist state through the comprehensive structure of socialism.⁶

In 1968, Bishop Mitzenheim of Thuringia said:

We do not wish to be the Church against socialism, but the Church for the citizens of the German Democratic Republic...⁷

In February 1968, the bishops of the regional Protestant churches explained: 'As citizens of a socialist state, we see ourselves faced with the task of realizing socialism as a form of just living together.'⁸ The Federal Synod of 1979 in Dessau commented on 10 years of 'Church in Socialism': 'We believe that the socialist society of our country also rests under our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is our task and here is our chance of duty to pass on the Gospel of the unbounded mercy of God ... Christians are called upon to co-operate in practical ways, seeking in communality the best for everyone through constructive and honest effort.'⁹ In the 1980s the churches exercised their right to make political statements in order to consult with the state on the following themes:

- the demilitarization of daily life
- liberalization of educational and informational policies
- environmental care
- freedom for visits in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Successes were microscopic because the state obstinately defended its principles. In the 1980s it became increasingly clear that the formula 'Church in Socialism' was not accurate - and was fatal. It had not brought about any relaxation. The Catholic Church refused to have anything to do with the expression 'Church in Socialism'. But in 1986 a change took place. Konrad Feiereis,¹⁰ professor of the Catholic philosophical-theological studies in Erfurt, gave a lecture in Budapest on the subject 'Living together, and the co-operation of Christians and Marxists in society'.

He said among other things: 'Christians are ready to contribute to the promotion of the good of the community from the basis of their faith, especially as regards the maintenance of peace... like Marxists, we are interested in keeping a strict eye on the natural sciences and technology so that they do not have a harmful effect on people. We are ready to participate in a dialogue and to co-operate on contemporary moral problems. We wish nothing more than to serve the people of our time more nobly and more efficiently' (Gaudium et Spes 1993).

In the autumn of 1986 an internal pastoral letter was published under the title 'The Catholic Church in the Socialist State'. In this letter the Catholic Church demonstrated a positive attitude to the Socialist State. 'The socialist social order also rests under the rule of God, in the same way as the capitalist order or any other in the world ... We Christians do not have to hide. Neighbourly help, care for the sick and handicapped, commitment to a good atmosphere at work or in the commune, solidarity with the helpless, help from parents in school classes or kindergarten groups... taking responsibility for leadership - these are fields where Christians can prove themselves worthy and where they must not opt out'.¹¹

We can say that the strategy pursued by the Catholic Church in relation to the state differed from that of the Protestant Church. It may be that the Protestant Church had a closer affinity to socialist ideals than the Catholic Church. The Protestant clergyman Falke from Erfurt characterized the relationship between church and state as a 'conflict-

community'. The Catholic Church saw itself as a 'forced neighbourhood relation'.¹²

After 1986 civil-rights and environmental movements, which were directly critical of the state, got together under the wings of the Protestant Church. Prayers for peace took place in many churches, preparatory to non-violent actions. These movements developed in particular in 1989 as thousands of people tried to escape through Hungary.

Here I shall digress and describe a little of what I experienced at that time.

In the autumn of 1986 I took over the running of Burgscheidungen Castle near Weimar. This was a college under the Christian Democratic Party for political education. Members of the Christian Democratic Party attended lectures, seminars and exercises about their party, in order to prepare themselves for functions like mayor or other minor posts in the party or society.

Burgscheidungen was a place for open discussions. On the 11th of September, I got 'the letter from Weimar', which was written by members of the Church and the Christian Democratic Party to members and to the committee. The aim of this letter was to 'deepen the dual responsibility of the Christian Democratic Party'.¹³ This smelled of rebellion. Participants on the course discussed this letter in an atmosphere of great agitation. It seemed that great changes would come. In the castle conferences of the governing board of the Christian Democratic Party also took place as well as special conferences for artists and scientists who were members of the Christian Democratic Party.

It was the time of 'glasnost' and 'perestrojka'. The Christian Democratic Party sensed the new era. In connection with the reforms put forward by Gorbachov, reforms in the German Democratic Republic were also demanded. Ministers visited and made suggestions on how to democratize the GDR.

But suddenly conferences in Burgscheidungen were prohibited because Honecker personally raised objections. He told the chairman of the Christian Democratic Party that he had heard that speeches and talks, which were not in the interests of socialism, were given in the castle. However, on the 27th of October 1989 (Egon Krenz had become chairman of the Council of State), a conference in Burgscheidungen was again allowed to take place. This was a conference of artists. The hall of the castle filled up. Gerald Götting, the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, went to his room. When they brought him a cup of coffee, he asked me 'What shall we do?'

I remembered his motto 'Continuity and revival' and said 'Maybe we don't need so much continuity but more revival'. He made a gesture of refusal. The well-known flautist Eckehard Haupt arrived to be presented with the national prize he had won. Mr Haupt tried to explain the political situation to Mr Götting. But Mr Götting did not or would not understand. I never saw a more complete lack of communication.

Mr Götting went to the hall. No applause. He went to the lectern and said the following:

The political situation is very difficult. Keep your heads. We must not be provocative. Think carefully. Things may turn out very differently. Christians must think constructively and do their duty.

No applause. After him it was the turn of Dr Werner Wünschmann, secretary for culture. He spoke about the tasks of Christian-inspired artists. After a few minutes the

listeners became restless. They stamped their feet and cried: 'Stop!' and 'Let's have the problems out in the open!' After a few minutes the hall became a witches' cauldron. The chairman asked the audience to take a break for lunch. But people with stomachs full of food can also be revolutionary.

During the afternoon session of the conference, the singer Eleonore Elstermann, member of the State Opera in Dresden, took the floor. In tears, she told about the brutality with which the police and state security had beaten demonstrators in Dresden. The hall was in uproar. The discussion became more and more heated.

Silence fell when the musical director in chief, Christian Kluttig, went to the lectern and asked the chairman what he meant by the words 'Things may turn out very differently'. Mr Götting did not seem to understand the question, although it was repeated several times. Finally he got to his feet. Mr Kluttig obstructed his way to the lectern. But instead of explaining openly and honestly that he was afraid of the Soviet Army or the National Army intervening to restore 'heavenly peace' in the GDR, he only reiterated his demands for caution.

A highlight of the stormy discussion was the contribution of the writer Uwe Grüning. He said that in the German Democratic Republic, reality had been abolished. He called upon the Christian Democratic Party to take part in this abolition no longer. And he called out:

'It is 12 o'clock. Maybe we should give ourselves up now'.

The hall was like an inferno. The audience demanded a new party conference to renew the Christian Democratic Party 'from top to toe'. The conference ended in the small hours with a concert of the artists in a revolutionary mood. A group of 10 leading members of the party got together after midnight and discussed two questions:

- Who shall approach Mr Götting and get him to step down?
- Who could take over the chairmanship of the party?

I thought that we had to find a *new* candidate. After a lengthy discussion, I said, 'Only a person with the status of complete political innocence can become chairman'. Amazed by the simple solution, the group broke up.

On the next day in 'New Time', the newspaper of the Christian Democratic Party, a leading article outlined the position of the party under the title 'Reforms and renewal - confidence and new power'. It contained real democratic demands, openly, without closing its eyes to the terrible truth.¹⁴ This was the time of Monday demonstrations in big towns. Everybody was surprised that the army stayed in barracks. People were delighted with their freedom.

On the 9th of November 1989, a conference of the governing body of the Christian Democratic Party took place in Berlin. After stormy discussions we elected a new chairmanship and secretariat. Many officials who had co-operated closely with the United Socialist Party were expelled. It was the night of the opening of the Wall.

On the next day the new chairman was elected. Nominees were Winfried Wolk, painter and graphic designer, and Lothar de Maizière, lawyer. Wolk spoke first. He

wanted to renew the party politically and wrest it from the patronage of the United Socialist Party. But he called attention to the fact that he was an artist - and that he wished to take up his profession again after a while.

Lothar de Maizière followed him, saying:

'We must succeed in taking the letters C,D, and U, seeing them in a new context and giving them new relevance. Our society is in a deep crisis - in an economic crisis and in a crisis of values. I know that we can expect help from the Gospel. I can only understand the political life of a Christian seen in relation to the Sermon on the Mount. It is vital that we give back to every man the feeling of his uniqueness as an image of God, his personal identity and his adulthood. The political field of our action is democracy'.¹⁵

De Maizière grappled critically with the term 'socialist democracy' and compared it with the terms 'rule of law' and 'legal security'. He demanded a culture of listening. In the discussion some clergymen attacked him very sharply. They protested because they felt that the Christian faith would be recruiting for a social system again. Christian values are for all people, not only for a party. The Christian Democratic Party must not be a clerical party. The party should not deal with the forces of conservatism. They feared that the church would only change the front in the class struggle. It would become a party and not a church.

I saw Lothar de Maizière at many party conferences and divine services. I came to know a modest, quiet, understanding and analytically thinking man, who avoided big words, big gestures and big crowds of people. Sometimes he even seemed a little bit shy. He was the perfect Christian Democrat. I learned a lot from him. But he had made a fundamental mistake. While working as a lawyer in SDR he had had contacts with 'STASI'.

The work on the 'Round Table' in Berlin and other 'round tables' across the country were part of Christian policy in the year 1990. Here the representatives of the churches were good contributors. They had a natural authority, also with the communists. In 1990, the 'Political Advisory Committees' were created. These had the task of preparing the future structure of government in the *Länder* and to gather the forces which had kept themselves blameless during the era of the GDR. I led a group in the preparation of a ministry of science and art in Thuringia. Christian-inspired policy has always meant working in a mature, human atmosphere.

The policy of the Christian Democratic party in the German Democratic Republic since 1990 was influenced by the Christian Democratic Party of the Federal Republic of Germany. The two parties were united in Hamburg.

The Christian Democratic Party attached great importance to handing over economic burdens and the whole capital of the Christian Democratic Party (East) to the state. The other parties of the former German Democratic Republic, in particular the United Socialist Party/Party of Democratic Socialism, should be compelled to do likewise one day. That was the hope. The citizens of the new German states had great confidence in the policy of the Christian Democratic Party. This is also the case today, but to a lesser extent. The Christian Democratic Party is not in particularly good spirits today. Non-

voters constitute a strong extra-parliamentary opposition. The right-wing spectrum grows stronger and stronger.

Not all parties have a good reputation. In public opinion, politicians are people who are only interested in power and privilege. They make a lot of promises which they do not keep. They increase their salaries and try to place state debts on the shoulders of the little man. That is a well-known song. The Christian Democratic Party has typical problems. The number of members is diminishing. The party is over-aged and the emotional attachment to the party is weak.¹⁶

Formerly, the Christian Democratic Party was attractive because it represented Christian values. These values have lost their importance. The Christian Democratic Party has also lost its traditional enemy when communism broke down and became emasculated.

The Christian Democratic Party represented a specific spectrum of opinions and attracted a certain group of voters, clearly differing from the Social Democratic Party.

Today's pluralism levels opinions. It does not force decisions. The big parties refrain from creating a sharp profile in order to attract the greatest number of votes. In our time we cannot create the political integration of people through ideology. The Christian Democratic Party tries to produce a policy statement on the basis of Christian values. But these Christian values have been part of everyday life for a long time. Charity has been replaced by the social functions of the state. Modern man seeks a balance between the moral and the immoral which is acceptable for him. The Christian religion reminds him too much of failures.

As a Christian I can come to very different results, when decisions are to be made. In *Gaudium et Spes* it is said that no Christian can claim the authority of Christianity and of the church for his opinions.

The Christian Democratic Party has difficulties in declaring her policy as Christian-inspired. The party pleads for liberal democracy and social market economy, for tolerance, solidarity and responsibility for one's own life. Christian values are a source of inspiration. The Christian Democratic Party has to show that it does not throw its principles overboard in order to keep its authority.

The Christian Democratic Party is considered to be a conservative party with a great sense of the present - and not much interest in visions of the future. But Christian-oriented policy today has to ask how coming generations are going to live. We live now at the expense of coming generations.

And that, it seems to me, is not very Christian, is it?

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